**The Bedtime Stories of a Spy**

CHAPTER 1 – From the Beginning

“No, you don’t want to hear that again. Let me tell you about a princess and a dragon,” Gary said to his daughter, with a smile playing on his lips.

“Daddy, please tell me! Please! You promised you would, so now you have to start from the beginning!” Denise snuggled down deeper into her pillow and batted her eyelashes pleadingly at her smiling father.

With a mixture of pride and amusement, he nudged her over and settled in for the telling of the story, *his* story.

“Long before I met your mother, there was another girl and it was a problem…”

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“I don’t know what you can do, brother. Our parents and…well *everyone* thinks you are going to marry Debbie. Gary, they think you’ve already proposed!” Danny yelled from the driver’s seat of the convertible 1959 Austen Healey.

“Rev the engine one last time and then hand me the wrench. And, stop telling me what I already know,” Gary said with exasperation, not at his brother, but at his situation and the stubborn nut that wouldn’t budge. Gary slid out from under the car, smiled at his younger brother, and said, “Let’s go see Uncle Spike.”

It wasn’t but a few minutes before they were racing across town. Miles and miles of orange orchards used to stretch from the mountains to the ocean in Southern California, but now patches of housing tracks were popping up here and there as San Bernardino’s population grew after the war and throughout the 1950s and early 60s. Gary and Danny hit Route 66 to head to Redlands and hopefully a solution. The top was down and both brothers were enjoying the sun on their faces on this unusually warm winter day.

“It doesn’t even feel like December when it’s almost 80 degrees outside,” Danny said with his eyes closed and head back, soaking in the sun.

There was only a little more than a week before finals at Cal Poly, Pomona and so far Gary had been having too much fun to focus much on his engineering classes. He could be very focused when he wanted, but his heart wasn’t in the subject. Danny, however, was square in the middle of his freshman year and excelling at it. The brothers were only 14 months apart and they chose as many classes together as the difference in years would allow.

One good speed bump snapped both boys out of their troubled reverie. Finals, their parents, and this whole situation with Debbie made Gary lay into the gas peddle and in no time they were in Spike’s driveway.

The day was bright and clear and the sky was so blue it would almost hurt your eyes to take it all in. Spike was loading his golf clubs into the trunk of his Cadillac, when he heard the familiar rumble of his nephews’ car pulling into the drive. “What are you boys doing all the way out here so early on a Saturday?” he said with a good-natured smile.

Gary, leaned around the windshield with a mixture of concern and hope creasing his brow and said, “Uncle Spike, do you have some time?”

Spike laughed, a great big ole bear laugh, and said, “Follow me to the club and we’ll hit some balls together.”

The boys followed Spike’s Caddie to the country club. They parked a little further away in the lot for non-members and as they strode toward the front door they saw Spike talking with a few men, probably those in his foursome for the day. Gary caught Danny’s sleeve and jutted his chin toward the scene. They slowed their pace and hung back till their uncle was finished talking. The four men nodded and shook hands and it was then that Spike spotted the boys and waved them over.

“Gentlemen, these are my nephews, Gary and Danny Wynn.” Greetings were exchanged all the way around and there seemed to be no ill will for disrupting their quartet of golfers. Spike threw an arm around each of their shoulders leading them to the café and said, “Boys, what do you need to tell me about?”

Over two cups of coffee—Danny ordered juice—Gary relayed the whole predicament surrounding what seemed like an impossible situation to his uncle. He felt like he was trapped. Debbie was a sweet girl, they had dated for well over a year and she was expecting a ring. Gary had never said word one about marriage; though his dad, Gene, had joked about it repeatedly in youth group events. There was an ill founded but growing assumption that Gary would do what his dad wanted and marry Debbie.

“She’s a great girl, Uncle Spike, she is. I just don’t want to marry her. But…but I don’t see any way out. Dad is pushing it and you know him. He’s even started talking to her parents as if it is a foregone conclusion,” Gary slammed his fist on the table rattling the cups.

“Enough of this sitting. Let’s go hit some balls and come up with a solution.” Spike paid the tab, grabbed his clubs from the rack, leading the boys to the driving range.

Gary had nothing left to say. Danny didn’t know what to say and Spike was silently contemplating the situation as they hit a dozen or so balls.

“Son, you are old enough to get married, but you don’t want to and that is just fine. Can you tell me what you *do* want?” Spike said with all sincerity.

Gary blurted, “I want adventure. I want to make my mark on the world and most of all…” he cast his head down for a minute and then raised his eyes to meet the steady gaze of Spike saying, “Most of all, I want to be deeply in love with the woman I marry.”

Though he was only 19, Gary spoke with such conviction Spike knew he had to help his nephew find a way out of this situation without hurting the girl too much or causing trouble between the families since they were both prominent in the church.

Ping. The sweet sound of a perfect hit rang out and Spike spun around and yelled, “I’ve got it.”

“It will take till Monday to arrange, but you need to meet me at 8:00 am sharp.” They headed back to the house to discuss the details of the plan and to enjoy what Aunt Jeanie was sure to have made for lunch.

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It was New Year’s Eve and the house was raucous with laughter and dancing. Friends and family members were everywhere—filling the living room, crowded in the kitchen, and spilling out onto the porch. Gary had made it through Christmas with evasive answers and redirection of conversations about him and marriage. Debbie was put out when all she got for Christmas were earrings, but Gary didn’t care, he needed out and Spike had found a way.

He had avoided the house long enough by entertaining friends on the porch. Gary got up, pushed through the throng and stepped into the living room. It teamed with laughter and conversation. He scanned the room first for Danny—who had his arm around his sweetheart, Connie Goodman—and then for his uncle. He needed their silent support to go through with this. Spike coughed and gave a wink and Gary responded with a slight nod.

“Everybody,“ Gary hollered over the din of the house party, “I have an announcement.”

Older women hushed and young girls snickered. “I bet you do!” a feminine voice called out from the crowd as all eyes turned to Gary.

“I bet Debbie wants to hear this,” called Sheila, Gary’s little sister, with all the teasing and playfulness of a 14 year old.

Debbie, and three of her friends, stepped into the doorway of the living room from the kitchen where they had been cutting their pies into thinner slices in a clever attempt to accommodate the numerous unexpected guests. She stepped further in as guests made way for her. With each step she gracefully removed her apron and smiled sweetly at each person as she passed. Her controlled smile made her appear complicit in this announcement of what the crowd believed to be a secret engagement. As if foreshadowing a wedding promenade, Debbie arrived in front of Gary and straightened her sweater and smoothed her skirt from where the apron had been and looked up expectantly, waiting.

“What is it Gary? What have you got to say?” Spike’s deep resonating voice boomed over the remaining tittle-tattle of the onlookers as they whispered their opinions of the match.

All eyes watching and on him, Gary breathed deeply and while looking straight at Debbie said, “I’ve been drafted and have to report in two days.”

Debbie gasped and the room erupted with questions. Erlene, Gary’s mother, ran over to her oldest and threw her arms around him and began to weep. Boys were being drafted all the time to Vietnam, but this was such a shock.

Gene Wynn, Gary’s father, was a railroad man like his father before him and a veteran of World War II. Gene was in the Pacific campaign and wound up on the beaches of Okinawa when the bombs went off in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hardened by life, war, and pride, Gene stood from his chair and examined his son. Gary held his mother in a tight embrace and locked eyes with his father. Only once did Gary’s eyes flicker away from the hard glare of his father to take in the scene of Debbie being consoled by her friends.

The look between father and son felt like an age, but then Gene stepped forward placing a hand on his wife’s shoulder and gently pulled her away until she stood back and tearfully gazed back and forth between husband and son. Gene held out his hand to Gary and said, “So, you are going to be a soldier…Then, go with God.”

Gary breathed a huge sigh of relief that he didn’t realize he had been holding since his father locked eyes on him moments before. They shook firmly and it hit Gary—he had changed his destiny and no one but his brother and uncle had to know the truth of what happened on that Monday morning a few weeks prior.

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It was nearly 8:00 am on Monday and the Austen Healey sputtered in the cold as Gary idled outside of Uncle Spike’s title company. In the rearview mirror he saw his uncle’s gleaming silver caddy pull into the parking lot. Spike waved him over. In a few motions, he was next to his uncle on the wide bench seat driving to the federal building.

“…I’ll talk to my friend and that’s when you do it Gary. Do you understand?”

With a glazed expression Gary’s eyes met his uncle’s.

“Do you still want out of this marriage? Do you still want to do this?” Spike said with pure calm and no pressure.

“Yes…yes, Uncle Spike… this is the only way.” Gary looked at his uncle, this huge man with bright sky blue eyes. He was a real hero. He had endured every one of the Pacific Island campaigns as the Americans painstakingly pushed their way toward Japan during World War II. He was Army Infantry and knew what it was like to take a beach and storm a stronghold. Spike was a munitions expert, which was a fancy name for the poor guy who had to clear the battlefield of all the unexploded bombs after the initial battle had been fought. He was a tough old goat of a man. He’d survived three tours of munitions duty in the Pacific only to be called up to fight in Korea less than ten years later.

Now it’s ten years beyond that, Vietnam is in full swing, and Spike was driving Gary to follow through with the only plan they had.

Both men strode into the building and up to the third flood. Spike had an easy way about him that people just took to. He smiled at the receptionist and said, “I’m here to speak with Major Patterson.”

The receptionist fluttered her lashes in response to his playful blue eyes and typed in an extension before saying, “Major, Mr… ahhh…Mr….”

“Spike Otto.”

“Mr. Otto is here to see you. Shall I show him back to your office?” With an involuntary nod and a “Yes, sir,” she whisked off the headset for the phone and led them both back to the farthest office on the left, past a pool of clacking typewriters and junior officers.

Major Patterson stood as they entered the room and smiled as he shook Spike’s hand. “Are you coming to enlist again Master Sergeant?”

“It’s not me this time Major, it’s my nephew. Only, he doesn’t want to enlist. He needs to get *drafted* and in a hurry.”

The Major looked from man to man with an unasked question in his eyes. Spike nodded to Gary and Gary proceeded to tell the Major about Debbie—at least the short version.

“So you need to get drafted so you don’t have to lie about enlisting, is that what I’m hearing son?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you know what you are getting yourself into and you still want to do this?”

“Yes, sir,” Gary said with conviction. Just then, a soldier was passing by with what looked like a couple shoeboxes in his arms.

“Private Gerdes, come in here.” The private stepped into the room at full attention.

“Gerdes, do you have draft cards in those boxes?”

“Sir. Yes, sir! The top box is filled with those who are about to be drafted, and the bottom has blank cards, sir.”

“Hand Mr. Wynn a blank card, private.” The private set down the boxes, retrieved a blank card, and handed it into Gary’s out-stretched hand.

Handing Gary a pen, the Major said, “Write your full name, address, and social security number on the card, son.”

In a clear hand, Gary wrote the information and then glanced over to the Major.

“Son, if you are going to change your future this way it is only right that you choose whose boots you are going to be putting on. So, pull a card out of that draft box, put yours in, and throw the man’s card into the trash bin.”

Running his finger over the top of the cards, Gary pulled one from near the front of the box. He slipped his own hand-written card into the box, and as he watched the other man’s card drop in to the bin he thought, “*I probably just saved his life.*”

CHAPTER 2 – Boot Camp

“That’s not fair!”

“Life’s not fair, kiddo.”

“Daaaaaaaad!” The boys protested in unison.

“I’m sorry, boys, your sister talked me into it and I crumbled. I should have called you in to hear…”

Chris sat down next to his father on the couch saying, “Well you didn’t get to the good part yet, did you Dad?”

“Did you tell about boot camp, because that one is my favorite,” Bryan said as he sat Indian style on the large wooden coffee table facing his dad.

“No, I hadn’t gotten there yet,” said Gary, loving how expectant their faces were for the story he’d told them a million times.

“Maybe…maybe you could tell us in our room tonight, “ Chris said excitedly.

“Ok kids, go get ready for bed and I’ll be right in.”

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Gary walked down the hallway to the left. The boys’ room was the last room straight ahead and upon opening the door he found…only *two* of his children, wide-eyed and smiling on the lower bunk across the room. He stepped in three of four paces and scanned the room. His eyes returned to Bryan, his second born, who had his arms wrapped around his knees, which were pulled tightly to his chest. The boy alternated between looking at his dad with a huge gap-toothed grin and giggling into his knees. Denise, his youngest, was right next to him with both hands clasped over her mouth and her eyes dancing with laughter.

“Where is your bro…”

“Ha HAA!!!” Screamed Christopher as the upper cupboard door over the built in closets came flying open, wizzing by Gary’s head and missing only by and inch or two at most.

In a flash, Gary realized the trap he’d walked into and whirling around with a growl he plucked his clever son out of the cupboard and threw him down in a near by bean bag and proceeded to tickle him mercilessly.

“Oh boy, you got me that time! That was pretty good, son, pretty stinkin’ good!” Gary said through gales of his own laughter.

Both Bryan and Denise had joined the ticklefest and all wound up in a giggling heap. In the fray, Gary had managed to wrap his big bear arms around all three kids as they now lay gasping for breath between fits of remnant giggles. He sighed contentedly with the pleasure of the moment.

Denise began to wiggle and in turning over on his chest she said, “Now can we here more of the story, Daddy?!”

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As a Southern California boy, Gary was used to sunshine, fresh air, and blue skies and out of all the bum luck he got stationed in the sweaty armpit of Fort Puke Lousy-anna, or so he called it. The name, and his opinion of the place, was solidified the moment he stepped beyond the air dam at the airport. From the tip of his nose to the top of his head, from his back to his feet, every part of him began to sweat. Humidity was unpleasant on every level and it sobered his mood.

Casting a glance around, his eyes landed on a soldier holding a sign that read, “Gary M. Wynn, Recruit.” As he stepped forward he was quickly herded inside a bus where other recruits were waiting. In a slow and deliberate procession, Gary walked the length of the bus taking the measure of each man as he passed. This was no show of bravado, rather, he wanted to get a sense of the men he would be soon be in the thick of it with. Some men met his gaze and others didn’t miss a beat in their story to take in the newcomer. Not being a joiner by nature, Gary chose an empty row near the back and slid into the window seat.

There were men from a half-dozen states or more, judging by the accents, totaling close to twenty men in all. The hum of conversation was punctuated by the occasional jocular laugh, which was a pleasant distraction from the thick air of the bus.

Gary leaned his head against the window with his eyes closed and tried to not think about the sweaty heat and what he’d gotten himself into.

Not too long later, the bus rattled off toward Fort Polk—it’s proper name—through forest after forest of unfamiliar trees. Here and there, the forest would open up its walls and reveal a farm with its orderly rows of harvested crops. This being the first week of the year 1963, Gary would have thought all the farming would be done for the winter, but he caught a glimpse of a farmer taking in what looked like the last acre of his harvest. The farmer’s waist-high bushes were heavy laden with blossoms that looked like clouds. “*Maybe it’s a cotton farm*,” Gary mused.

It took just over an hour, but soon enough they rumbled toward the front gates of the base, a base Gary knew had been nicknamed the “Home of Heroes.” It was the post for basic training for all the boys drafted into the Vietnam War.

“*At least it had a prestigious heritage as a base, even if it was in the middle of a swamp*,” thought Gary to himself.

Upon arrival, a man with a clipboard stood a few feet away from the parking bus. He, Drill Sergeant McNamara, began to yell through the open windows for the recruits to “*Leave the vehicle quickly, quietly, and to follow me to your new home*.” Predictably, the Sergeant led the group to an equally hot and steamy barrack that seemed to only recently be vacated by an earlier troop of recruits. Gary took the bed assigned to him and set his whole bag in the closet next to it.

“I’ll unpack later,” he said quietly.

“That’s right GRUNTS! Don’t bother unpacking because you’ve got work to do today!” The Drill Sergeant yelled even though he was only a few feet away. “Ten hut!!!”

All the men flipped around and faced the Sergeant and stood as straight as poles. They may not have been soldiers yet, but they knew enough to stand up straight and shout, “Yes, sir!”

The rest of the day was about standing in lines to be given uniforms, a helmet, boots, shirts, pants, shorts, socks, even underwear of all things. They were handed every possible thing you could need—all army issue—which was a good thing because Gary only brought the t-shirt and jeans he was wearing, one sweater, a coat, and something a little nicer to wear to church on Sundays as far as clothes go. As for the rest of his belongings, he brought a Bible, some flip-flops, a picture of his family, and a bundle of letters from friends and family wishing him well. He stowed a couple Western novels in his pack as well—Louis L’Amour’s *Hondo* was one of his all-time favorites and he had just received *How the West Was Won* at Christmas, so they made the trip with him as well.

When they all gathered for Mess the first night, the Drill Sergeant explained that they had made it to base three weeks before boot camp was officially supposed to start. They were just one squad among four that would make up their platoon. And over the next few weeks platoon after platoon would be loading in to fill out their company and the several others that would make up their battalion. Soon enough several thousand men would be swarming this base and Gary thought, *“It feels like being the first ant at a picnic of pain.”*

“Get a good night’s sleep tonight grunts, because tomorrow it begins!” Yelled the Drill Sergeant.

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Gary could hear clanging loud enough to raise the dead in a dream he was having of the breeze coming off the ocean as he lounged in the warm sun, a very warm sun come to think of it. It was actually really hot, and where was that clanging coming from…

Opening his eyes in the pitch black Gary heard movement all around him and it took half a second to realize where he was. The instant that the drill sergeant flipped on the lights revealing both he and the Platoon Leader—a captain by the look of it—Gary sprang to his feet and stood at attention at the end of his bed like every other recruit in the room.

The drill sergeant had this sing-songy way of shouting everything. Whether it was a command or simple information, he would always emphasize certain syllables throughout the sentence and with his deep Southern accent it made Gary want to smile even when that is the last thing you want to do in boot camp.

“You wee-ill welcome your co-mmanding of-fi-cer, Captain James Gaskins of THE 502nd battalion. Tee-n Hut!!!”

“Sir, yes, sir!” Shouted the men in response.

“You wee-ill get dressed in your PT clothes with boots ON and be lined up alphabetically by last name in 5 minutes outside un-der the flagpole or you wee-il be running the rest of the day. Do you hee-ar me, GRUNTS?”

“Sir. Yes, sir!!!”

The men stood rigid, practically vibrating in their readiness to complete the order, but not knowing if they were allowed to move.

“Let’s GOOOO!!! Move! Move! Move!” Shouted the Drilly.

The men scrambled to footlockers and closets to retrieve their gear. Gary put his boots on first and his clothes would have to be dawned on the way. Still pulling his t-shirt over his head as he ran up to the flagpole, he heard men shouting their last names in the pre-dawn glow in a desperate attempt to meet the deadline. Fortunately, with a name like Wynn, he was almost always last, so he headed for the left of the line. As it happened, there was a man named Ziggart there who had the same thought. They made up the tail end of the frenzy and stood at attention.

“Geee-it it dunnn people. What eeez the problem?! Move it, now! Now! NOW!!!”

Men stopped trying to do it right and settled for getting it done by stepping into line somewhere around where they were supposed to be. Gary wasn’t sure, but he suspected that they were meant to fail that first exercise. Running them wasn’t necessarily a punishment; it was just a typical day in the Army from what he’d heard from his dad and uncle.

The men all stood at rigid attention and though Gary had failed to put his watch on, he was pretty sure it was somewhere in the latter half of the 4 o’clock hour.

The captain and sergeant stood in a pool of light directly under a lamppost situated ten paces beyond the flagpole and roughly 40 paces from Gary. Through the early morning mist, he could see them exchange a couple of low-voiced comments as they looked up and down the line at what turned out to be 18 men, not including himself. They stared in his direction and his eyes snapped forward while he kept as neutral of an expression as possible.

Uncle Spike had warned him not to “stick out” in boot camp. *“Be friendly when it is appropriate, but don’t be known as the clown,”* Spike had said. *“Don’t always be the first to speak, but don’t be invisible either. The Army likes those who are exceptional, but if you are a peg that sticks out too much one way or the other, it is the Army’s job to pound you back into place.”*

CAPTAIN Gaskins broke the silence as he strode forward with a preternatural calm that the Drill Sergeant (good man though he was) lacked. “Men,” he said firmly, “Today is the dividing line in your life. Forevermore, you will look back and think ‘*Did that happen before or after I joined the Army?*’ Because whether you are active, or not, from here on out, you will always be a soldier.”

About half of the line burst out with a stilted, “Sir. Yes, sir.”

Raising his hand to stop further affirmations, the captain made a slow stroll along the line looking in to the eyes of each man. His words had a rhythmic cadence as he explained that he had a special project for them to complete before boot camp officially started. His stroll and words were so slow that had adrenaline not still been pumping through the men from the hustle and bustle of getting into line, the captain could have put them to sleep with his smooth baritone voice. Occasionally, he would stop to take the full measure of a man, but generally he just kept at his slow amble down the line until he reached Gary.

The Captain glanced down at the name badge and read aloud, “WYNN.” He looked into Gary’s eyes, and in that moment, Gary knew this man was as tough as nails, no matter how refined his voice was.

Without breaking eye contact the Captain said in a voice as even as empty scales, “After breakfast, I expect *you* to report to my office at Oh-six-hundred hours, Private.”

This was such an unexpected statement that Gary was momentarily speechless. His mouth gaped open, then snapped shut. The other men broke form and blatantly stared at the Captain and Gary.

“Sir. Yes, sir.” Gary projected, though not wanting to scream directly in his Captain’s face, which was still lingering inches from his own.

The Captain held the moment one beat longer than was comfortable before he stepped away with a nod to the Drill Sergeant—not that even one second of that whole exchange was comfortable for Gary.

Gary’s mind was whirling. He’d done exactly what he was told by Uncle Spike. He tried not to stick out, but was friendly at dinner the night before and in line at all the stations before that. What had he done to get singled out? For crying out loud, he had only been in the Army for 24 hours and he was already in trouble!

The Drill Sergeant’s shout brought him back to the present in a snap.

“Alll-right-ty me-en. Head to the Mess Hall for breakfast and be prepared to puke it all up within the next few hours of running.”

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Breakfast was a sober affair, for Gary at least. He took a steaming hot mug of black coffee with just a dash of sugar to take the edge off the bitterness and settled for a piece of dry toast. He had no idea what he was in for at this the meeting with the Captain. He sat down at an empty table to contemplate his predicament. One-by-one he watched men look at him and make the mental choice of whether or not to sit with “the Private who was already singled out.”

Weaker men wandered to tables as far from him as possible, but a few stout looking farm boys sat down and introduced themselves as Clark and Hardy. They were both from southern states and radiated the down-to-earth attitudes and quiet confidence he’d always associated with cowboys and farmers. These were the kind of men he wanted to be in battle with.

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The *tick, tick, tick* of the second hand pounded out the drum beat of Gary’s heart as he sat staring at the clock outside the Captain’s office, seven minutes left before he headed into the unknown. He sat erect on a bench across from the secretary; she blithely clacked away on her Underwood typewriter with astonishing speed.

Minutes ticked by, or an eternity depending on how you count. A junior officer all but burst out of the Captain’s door, shutting it behind him so quickly that the glass rattled in its frame. He handed the secretary, Benita, some files and pointing to a document lying on top, saying, “This needs to be sent to the General, immediately.” She nodded her consent while he turned, eyed Gary briefly, and then strode down the hallway with purpose.

The intercom squawked a moment later and Benita answered saying, “Yes, sir?” and then, as she looked at Gary, “Yes, sir.”

“It’s time for you to go in Private. Go in and stand at attention until you are told to do otherwise.” She said it all so matter-of-factly. Surely it was meant as kindly advice, but something about how she said it felt ominous.

Gary opened the door to the Captain’s office catching the eye of the Drill Sergeant standing to the side and closed it behind him in a way that would cause the least of amount of rattling of the glass. The door clicked shut and he stepped forward, put his heals together, and saluted the Captain with a sharp, “Sir. Yes, sir.”

“At ease, Private.” Gary remained standing, but in the more relaxed manner of having his hands behind his back and his feet shoulder-width apart.

“Wynn, I hear you are an engineer.”

Shocked, Gary stammered, “Ahhhh…well, not exactly, sir.”

“What does ‘not exactly’ mean, Private? It says in your file that you are studying engineering at California Polytechnic College, Pomona. Is your file wrong?” barked the CAPTAIN.

“No, sir…I mean, yes, sir.”

“Which is it, son?”

“No, sir, my file is not wrong. Yes, sir, I am studying engineering, but I only just started my core classes.”

“Well, that will have to do, Private. I have a job for you.”

Gary waited, without moving, though his posture indicated that he was anything but “at ease.”

“Wynn, I need you to carve out a PT course from the forest behind your barracks. It needs to be one mile long and have twelve interactive obstacle course elements.”

“Sir. Yes, sir.”

“Do you have any questions, Wynn?”

“Sir. Yes, sir. Where do I get the tools and supplies to complete the task?”

“Private, I don’t care if you have to *beg*, *borrow*, or *steal* what you need, I just want you to take the squad, and GET IT DONE.”

Turning to look at the Sergeant, the Captain said, “This will be their PT until it’s done, Commander.” The Sergeant gave a curt nod and a *‘Yes, sir.’*

Captain Gaskins looked back at Gary with cool deliberation, “Dismissed.”

CHAPTER 3 – The Impossible

Gary had contemplated a dozen different scenarios in meeting with the CAPTAIN, but *this*—being made the lead on a project on his first day—had never even been a flicker of a thought. He closed the door to the office behind him and with a soft whistle of a breath, he thought, *“Thank God, I’m not in trouble.”*

It was O615 and Gary wasn’t going to lose a minute. He begged some paper and a pen from Benita and sat scribbling out lists on the side of her desk. Row after row he listed items they’d need to acquire to create the course. With a wink and a smile he waved the pen and said, “I’m going to steal *this* as the first step in getting the job done!” Then, he ran out the doors toward the barracks.

The men where supposed to rally at the flagpole for PT in 15 minutes, which gave him a precious few minutes to have a look-see at the forest the Captain indicated for the course.

Rounding the barracks, he trotted toward the squad gathering at the flagpole and walked straight up to First Sergeant McNamara.

“Sir, you just say the word when you want me to get the project going.”

In a low tone of bridled power McNamara said, “Line up, Private. You’ll have your turn.”

“Sir. Yes, sir,” Gary said as he turned and joined Ziggart at the far left of the line.

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“GRUNTS! Captain Gaskins has a project for you all.” Imperceptibly turning his head, McNamara looked to Gary and said with a sneer, “Wynn, how about you enlighten us.”

Murmurs and surprise rippled through the line as Gary stepped a dozen paces from the squad, though still a few short of the Drill Sergeant.

Facing the men, he said, “Ok, fellas, we have no time to lose. Hardy and Clark, step forward.”

Gary projected loud enough for everyone to hear, “The Captain has given us license to *beg, borrow, or steal* every single item on these lists and get them back here ASAP.” Tearing the page in half, Gary handed a list to each man.

“Privates, pick two men each, and get it done.”

Hardy perused his list carefully. Clark, with a smile that said *‘I bet on the right horse,’* asked, “Do you want us to bring the stuff back as we get it, or come back only when we have everything?”

“Great question, Clark. The priority items on your list for the first phase include gloves, chainsaws, axes, and handsaws. Bring those items back within the hour and everything else, send a man back with them as soon as you get them.”

“Hardy, the priority items on your list are the top five items and the same timing applies. However, send someone running back with that first item pronto.” Hardy nodded.

“Gentlemen,” Gary said, stepping back to address the whole squad, “the Captain made it crystal clear that this obstacle course is of the utmost priority. Let’s show him what we can do.”

Hardy called out to Ferguson and Wong, “Boys, you’re with me. Let’s get a move on,” and the three jogged away toward the workshop. Clark pointed a finger at two men and said, “What are your names, Privates?”

“McCoy.”

“And, I’m Huck Robinson.”

“Robinson. McCoy. You are on my team. Follow me.” They jogged off in another direction.

“The rest of you, follow me.” Gary turned to lead the men to the forest and almost as an after thought he stopped, looked at Sergeant McNamara, and said, “Ok, sir?”

“*Go*. I’ll be in the Officer’s Day Room. I’ll see you in the Mess at chow time.” Sergeant McNamara walked away with a harrumph grumbling something about killing time before boot.

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Behind the barracks stood an old oak tree that spread its leafless winter branches out like the arms of an all-too-thin grandmother. Gary had chosen the ground to the right of the tree for the beginning of the course. It was an easy visual marker for anyone looking for the trailhead into this thickly wooded forest.

Gary had just turned around to explain the task ahead to the dozen men remaining when Ferguson came roaring up in a jeep. He skidded to a halt in the soft dirt at the edge of the forest, threw on the break, and hopped out all in one motion. “Hardy said you needed this right away, sir.”

Taking the can of red spray paint from the private, Gary said, “Thank you, Ferguson. Nice work on *acquiring* the jeep.”

“Ahhh…well…I figured it’d help us gather up the stuff a whole lot quicker,” he said with a sheepish grin as he rubbed the back of his neck absentmindedly stroking the buzz cut he’d received the day before.

“I did say, ‘beg, borrow, or steal’ so get back to work using that thing before we get caught. Oh, and if anyone asks questions, tell them its needed for Captain Gaskins special project.”

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Stepping beyond the old oak tree, Gary marked out the course with the spray paint in a dotted line on the forest floor. At varying intervals he would stop at some strategic spot and designate a man to get to work clearing the area and figuring out how to build a particular element of the obstacle course while he did it. He assured them that the supplies would show up to get the job done shortly and they needed to be ready when they arrived.

At each stop on the circuit, he left man after man to design and build a climbing wall, a mud pit crawl with barbed wire, a rope swing over the stream, and on and on. By the time he had all twelve men in place at the various obstacle course stations, with sufficient instruction, he had popped back out of the edge of the forest a good hundred and fifty feet to the west of the old oak tree. He looked to the tree and saw Ferguson’s jeep with Wong unloading the first round of supplies.

“Ho there!” Gary called as he trotted toward the men.

Robinson rounded the corner of the barracks right as Gary arrived at the jeep. He was rolling a wheelbarrow full of shovels, gloves, and pick axes. He called out, “Big Dan Clark has just about talked his way into a chainsaw. It should be here soon, and sooner yet if the jeep goes for it.”

Gary turned, “Ferguson, you heard the man. Go get us a chainsaw.”

“Wong, you and Robinson follow the red line with as much as you can carry and start distributing the supplies among the 12 stations. Hand me six pairs of gloves and six shovels. I’ll work my way back from the end so those boys will get some of what they need quicker. When you’re done, come back to the oak tree, and link back up with your team until all the supplies are gathered.”

Both men nodded and started filling the wheelbarrow as full as they could. Just then, McCoy showed up with a duffle bag slung over his shoulder with a handful of rakes and hoes sticking out the top. It looked like a quiver full of unusual arrows. “Here you are, sir,” said McCoy as he handed over the duffle bag and a good length of rope.

“Perfect timing, McCoy.” Gary stuck in a couple shovels among the rakes, slung the bag and the rope over his shoulder and palmed the last few shovels.

“How far along on the list do you think you are? Give me a percentage, McCoy.”

McCoy hemmed and hawed for a moment before resolving on a figure of 75% completion for their list. “The problem is, sir, Clark is looking for a way to get the lumber and paint back here.”

“No problem. Ferguson just went to pick up the chainsaw; I’m sure he’ll get all that he can from Clark and haul it back here. You head back to help Clark and if you see Hardy, tell him his boys will be back after they distribute the supplies. Then, as soon as you all finish with gathering, high-tail-it back here to help out with construction.”

“Sir. Yes, sir,” hollered McCoy as he ran back toward the main buildings of the base.

Gary shook his head. It felt a bit strange being given the same respect that the officers garnered in being called “sir” but it made sense. At least for the moment, he *was* in charge.

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Gary must have run the course a dozen or more times throughout the morning, but as he strode into the Captain’s office at 5 minutes to twelve-hundred hours the adrenaline gave him a second wind. He knocked on the doorframe and waited.

Captain Gaskins looked up and did a double take. “Wynn, what in the world are you doing here? I thought I told you to build me an obstacle course. I don’t want to see your face for another three weeks till Boot Camp starts.”

“So…you don’t want to see it then?”

“What are you talking about? You can’t possibly be finished.”

“Yes, sir, we are.”

“I don’t believe it.” The Captain sat staring hard at Gary daring him to recant.

“Sorry, sir. You didn’t tell me you wanted it to take the full three weeks, so I just assumed it was to be done ASAP.”

“Show me,” said the Captain as he stood from his desk.

Gary and Captain Gaskins walked out of the administrative wing past the Officer’s Day Room. Gaskins paused just outside the door long enough to holler to the group playing pool. “Sergeant McNamara, finish that later. Wynn has got something to show us.”

The Captain tossed his keys to McNamara and said, “Where we headed, Wynn?”

“To the old oak tree behind the barracks, sir.” And off they went.

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Sergeant McNamara pulled up alongside another jeep and all three men hopped out to see the whole squad, lined up, and at attention on the edge of the forest under the oak tree.

“Take me through the paces, Private.”

“Sir. Yes, sir,” Gary said with a salute. “First, let me praise the exemplary work of the squad. Clark and Hardy are exceptional leaders. Wong, McCoy, and Robinson worked their tails off acquiring and distributing supplies. Barron can handle barbed wire like he was a snake charmer from India and Ferguson, well he is just plain *resourceful*. Follow me, Captain, and I’ll show you the course.” Gary went through each man’s contribution and how he and the squad problem solved at each step of the construction as the entire group walked the mile-long course.

The Captain was examining the 15-foot climbing wall that was made up of both lumber and rough-hewn branches, noting that the clever variation in materials was its own obstacle. Simultaneously Gary noticed that the arrow on the directional sign was beginning to drip. Clearly, it had been painted only moments before he and the Captain arrived and was still wet when they nailed it up on a post. He just smiled and moved the Captain on to the next element in the course.

Upon finishing the course and exiting the forest, the Captain nodded to McNamara and the Drill Sergeant gave the order, “For a job ex-ceptional-ly weee-ll done, he-ad off to Mess before they close up and the-en, you are all gran-ted time off for the rest of the day. En-joy eet, grunts, be-cause to-mor-row eet’s back to *work*.”

The men all erupted into a noisy clatter of hoots and hollers as they walked away toward the mess hall. Big Dan Clark clapped Gary on the shoulder and Ferguson gave him a conspiratorial wink as he got back in the jeep presumably to return it.

Gary turned to the Captain and started to speak when the Captain cut him off, “Wynn, you’re coming with me.”

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“Seriously, you want me to apply, Captain?”

“Yes, Wynn, I do. I’m recommending you for Military Intelligence immediately. I’m so impressed with your ability to get the job done *that well* in *that short* a period of time, well, we need men like you son doing work that will use your mind and not just your brawn.”

“However, you should know,” the Captain paused, “the application for the Central Intelligence Core is no joke. I hear the paperwork takes three months to get done, so, starting today you no longer need to attend any physical training sessions.”

A whisper of a suppressed smile flashed across the Captain’s face as he cleared his throat. “Your official task will be redecorating the Officer’s Day Room, so be sure to get that done, but simultaneously use the time to get your application done.”

Standing and rounding the desk, the Captain gripped Gary’s shoulder and said, “You’ve earned it son. No one’s gonna believe me when I tell ‘em you carved the whole dad-blamed course out of the forest in less than six hours!” The Captain leaned back and roared with laughter.